The chapter discusses early literacy education in Arabic for native Arabic-speaking children in four Arabic-speaking groups: the Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel, the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and native Arabic-speaking children in two Gulf countries: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The chapter aims to provide a representative portrayal of the theory and practice of early literacy education in these regions. It reveals potential shared conceptions regarding the basic components of early reading development, but also some different challenges. A main challenge that all groups face, however, is the translation of such concepts into teacher training and appropriate materials for the teaching of literacy in Standard Arabic, especially in the light of diglossia. The chapter opens with a brief overview of the structure of the Arabic phonology and orthography based on a comprehensive chapter authored by Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb and published in the *Handbook of Arabic Literacy: Insights and Perspectives* (Saiegh-Haddad and Joshi, 2014). Then, issues in early Arabic literacy education in each of the country contexts are discussed. The chapter closes with a discussion of major challenges for current and future early literacy provision in Arabic.

The structure of Arabic phonology and orthography

The most conspicuous feature of the Arabic language is diglossia (Ferguson, 1959; Maamouri, 1998; Saiegh-Haddad, 2012) which has a direct impact on language and literacy acquisition in Arabic (Khamis-Dakwar, 2012; Laks and Berman, 2014; Myhill, 2014; Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2012, in press; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011; Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014). According to Ferguson, a diglossic context is characterized by a stable co-existence of two linguistically related language varieties: a High, primarily written, variety and a Low spoken variety. These are used for distinct sets of complementary functions and in different spheres of social interaction. The spoken variety, the naturally acquired mother tongue, is used in everyday interpersonal communication whereas the standard variety is acquired mainly formally and is the language of reading and writing. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA or Standard Arabic), a modern descendant of Classical Arabic and Literary Arabic, is to a high degree uniform across the Arabic-speaking world and is the only language variety that has a conventional written form. Therefore, Standard Arabic is the language in which the classically defined literacy functions are executed and it is the only variety through which
reading and writing is taught at school. Hence, once children enter school, they are formally and extensively exposed to Modern Standard Arabic as the language of reading and writing. Spoken interactions, even inside the classroom, may be conducted in Spoken Arabic or in a semi-standard variety known as ‘Educated Spoken Arabic’ (Badawi, 1973), except probably during Arabic lessons, where Standard Arabic is more dominant, at least in aspiration (Amara, 1995).

Despite such deceivingly dichotomous context, and while Spoken Arabic is undoubtedly the primary spoken language, native speakers of Arabic, including young children, are actively and constantly engaged with Standard Arabic as well; they pray, do their homework and study for their exams in Standard Arabic, and they also watch many TV programmes and dubbed series in this variety. Thus, besides proficiency in using Spoken Arabic, linguistic proficiency in Arabic involves, from an early age, concurrent proficiency in Standard Arabic. It is noteworthy that modern functions of literacy, including electronic writing in the social media, such as Facebook and SMS, are often conducted in the local spoken dialects using either the Roman alphabet along with a few numerals representing some of the unique Arabic sounds, or a modified version of the Arabic alphabet. The use of this variety for reading and writing in the electronic media emerges naturally among users and no formal instruction in using it is provided.

The phonemic inventory of Standard Arabic comprises 28 consonantal phonemes and six vowel phonemes, and all syllables in Standard Arabic begin with a single consonant (C) serving as the syllable onset and necessarily followed by a vowel (V), as the syllable nucleus/peak. The syllabic structure of Arabic is relatively simple with CV and CVC types the most predominant. The phonological structure of Standard Arabic is usually at variance with that of Spoken Arabic, which typically comprises a smaller set of consonants and a larger number of vowels.

It is not possible to describe the phonological and orthographic structure of Arabic without a description of its morphology. This is because morphology is central to both the orthographic and the phonological structure of Arabic words. Arabic is a highly agglutinated language. A predominant inflectional system common to both nouns and verbs in Standard Arabic involves primarily stem-final vowels which denote the syntactic categories of case for nouns and adjectives and mood for verbs (Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014). These inflectional categories have disappeared from all dialects of Spoken Arabic. Agglutination in Arabic extends to a set of clitics, including direct objects, possessives, prepositions and other grammatical markers that attach to the word as unstressed prefixes or suffixes resulting in one-word phrases and clauses.

Another compelling feature of the morphology of Semitic Arabic is its non-linear or non-concatenative structure (Larcher, 2006; McCarthy, 1981). Words in Arabic are minimally bi-morphemic comprising two independently unpronounceable bound morphemes: a root and a word-pattern. The tri-consonantal root (e.g. XBZ ‘bake’, DHN ‘paint’, HLQ ‘shave’ or ‘have a hair-cut’, TBB ‘medicate’) provides the core semantic meaning shared by all words within a root-related family of lexical items whereas the word-pattern (e.g. agentive CaCCa:C /xabba:z/ ‘baker’, /dahhan/ ‘painter’ /hallaq/ ‘barber’ and CaCi:C /pabi:b/ ‘doctor’) links all word-pattern-related lexical items as having the same prosodic structure (e.g. stress, vowels) and a similar categorical meaning and part of speech.

Arabic is written from right to left in a cursive script, in which all but six letters, ‘kicking letters’, may ligate forward to a following letter. Arabic orthography is primarily a representation of Standard Arabic. It consists of 28 letters that represent the consonants of the language (three of them ϱϭ΍ act as matres lectionis ‘mothers of reading’ and are also used to represent
Early literacy education in Arabic

the three Standard Arabic long vowels) and an optional system of diacritics that map mainly the phonemic short vowels and the morpho-syntactic stem-final endings. Diacritics are also used to represent other minor phonological features such as null vowelization and consonant doubling (for more, see Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014). The fact that the Arabic orthography is corroborated by a system of diacritics results in two orthographies: a vowelled grapho-phonologically shallow orthography and an unvowelled grapho-phonologically deep yet morpho-orthographically transparent orthography. The bulk of Arabic texts are unvowelled while vowelization is commonly used in the teaching of reading, as well as in religious and literary texts and in children’s literature.

Implications for literacy instruction in Arabic

A defining feature of diglossia is paired lexical items (Ferguson, 1959). Paired lexical items (or cognates) make about 40 per cent of the lexicon of young children (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014) – though the exact percentage might vary in different spoken Arabic dialects. Paired lexical items are a manifestation of the phonological distance between Standard and Spoken Arabic. In Arabic some phonemes are present only in the standard variety and may therefore not be familiar to children when they embark upon the acquisition of reading in the first grade. Research has shown that these phonemes are a particular stumbling block for children’s acquisition of phonological awareness and word decoding in Arabic (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011). In light of that, initial reading acquisition in Arabic requires both the acquisition of the phonological representation of the basic phonemic units as well as their orthographic representation. This task is compounded by the fact that some letters are used to represent the phonemes that are shared by Spoken and Standard Arabic and this might result in children confusing Standard phonemes with Spoken phonemes, and in difficulty linking the different phonemes with the specific letters that represent them in the Arabic orthography.

Given the phonological distance between Spoken and Standard Arabic, when a child is not familiar with a word, s/he might not be familiar with the concept of the word or with its phonological form, or with both phonological form and meaning (Saiegh-Haddad, 2004). This implies that even when the phonological form of the word is regularly represented, as in shallow vowelled Arabic, phonological recoding might not automatically lead to lexical access because the concept encoded has a different phonological representation in the lexicon of speakers. This has important implications for orthographic depth and reading development in Arabic (Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014; Saiegh-Haddad and Schiff, 2016).

Leaving aside diglossia and the psycholinguistic reality of orthographic depth in Arabic, vowelled Arabic orthography maps Standard Arabic consonants and long vowels in a rather regular way. This implies that, in keeping with other shallow orthographies, word decoding in Arabic should be easy to master (Seymour et al., 2003). Yet, research has shown that this is not the case (Saiegh-Haddad, in press) and reasons proposed have included diglossia, use of diacritics, letter complexity and reading instructional methods (for more, see Handbook of Arabic Literacy: Insights and Perspectives, 2014). Unvowelled Arabic is grapho-phonologically deep due to the absence of the optional diacritics mapping the short vowels, rather than to equivocal graphemes as is the case in English. This orthography, though grapho-phonologically underspecified, is a fully specified and morpho-orthographically consistent abjad (Daniels, 1992) with a regular relationship between the consonantal material of words mapping its morphological structure (root consonants in particular) and their orthographic representation.
This, together with the centrality of morphology in the lexicon of Arabic native speakers, appears to enhance morphological processing in reading and spelling, even among very young learners (Abu-Rabia et al., 2003; Saiegh-Haddad, 2013; Taha and Saiegh-Haddad, 2016a, 2016b) and even in Arabic L2 (Farran et al., 2011; Saiegh-Haddad and Geva, 2008). This implies the importance of developing morphological awareness in Arabic as a way of leveraging morphological processing in reading and spelling (Saiegh-Haddad, in press).

Early literacy education in Arabic

In this section, we will discuss early literacy education in Arabic in four native Arabic-speaking groups: the Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel, the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and Arabic-speaking children in two Gulf countries: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The case of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories

Arabic literacy policy and practice in Israel

Arabic is the mother tongue of approximately one and a half million Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, native speakers of the Palestinian Arabic vernacular, all of whom acquire Arabic as L1. Moreover, the great majority attend Arabic-medium schools and study all school subjects in Arabic, with Hebrew introduced only in the third grade (age eight to nine years) and taught as a foreign language. English is introduced as a third written language in the fourth grade, a second foreign language after Hebrew and a fourth oral language after Spoken Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew and English. Education in Israel is centralized. Therefore, one ministry and one pedagogical secretariat is in charge of education in all pre-college/university institutions, Jewish and Arab. However, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, an Arabic language division is responsible for the specific curricula (content and method) followed in Arab schools. All of the Arab schools in Israel are non-boarding coeducational public schools. There are a few private Christian schools (serving 33,000 students) and they all comply generally with the regulations of the Ministry of Education and its nationally endorsed curriculum. All primary education in Israel is free from age three and compulsory from age five, one year before grade 1, through to ten. Grade retaking is not common. The general policy is for students failing nationally administered exams and/or in-school exams to be identified and given suitable intervention and support. Students with learning/reading disabilities are integrated within the regular classrooms but are drawn from their classrooms for intervention and extra help by special education teachers.

The concept of early literacy as adopted by the division of Arabic in the Israeli Ministry of Education has undergone a remarkable makeover in recent years and following the publication, in 2009, of the Curriculum for Arabic Language Education: Language, Literature and Culture, for the elementary school: Grades: 1–6 (Ministry of Education, 2009). The New Curriculum conceives early literacy within the framework of current theories, underscoring the central role of word-level reading (Perfetti, 1985, 2007) and underlying metalinguistic insights, while accommodating the linguistic and orthographic characteristics of Arabic (Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb, 2014). Three characteristics define the concept of early literacy as depicted by the New Curriculum. First, it focuses on the teaching of basic decoding skills in the early grades following a synthetic phonics approach. Second, given the shallow orthography of vowellized Arabic, it projects a fast, successful transition from basic decoding of words and simple sentences to reading simple texts; extended simple texts are
used in the early grades to provide practice in decoding and in order to enhance the development of fluency and orthographic self-teaching (Share, 1995). Third, given the diglossic nature of Arabic, the new curriculum mandates capitalization on the spoken vernacular of the learners in leveraging literacy education in Standard Arabic. This latter feature is reflected in the following assumption:

The child comes to school having developed a very rich and varied linguistic knowledge especially in Spoken Arabic, and to some extent also in Standard Arabic . . . The acquisition and the development of Spoken and Standard Arabic start in early childhood and continue throughout the elementary school grades.

(p. 12)

The New Curriculum book devotes a special section (Chapter 3, p. 18) to a theoretical discussion of literacy acquisition in the first grade, as well as a discussion of the impact of diglossia (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2012; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011) and concludes with the argument that proper, direct instruction and sufficient practice in word decoding should generate high levels of decoding accuracy by the end of the first grade. At the same time, it concedes that the linguistic distance between Standard Arabic and Spoken Arabic might make simple decoding more challenging, especially when letters encode phonemes absent from the spoken variety of children. These aspects of the linguistic distance between the two languages should be taken into account when teaching basic decoding skills, and in phonological awareness instruction in Arabic. The chapter reminds the reader of the importance of developing rapid and accurate decoding skills for decontextualized words, especially given old practices of training children to guess the meanings of words out of context as a literacy education goal. According to the New Curriculum, children are expected, by the end of the first grade, to have mastered all the letters of the Arabic alphabet in their different shapes, as well as all the diacritics denoting short vowels, consonant doubling and null vowellization. They are also expected to read simple texts accurately and to spell with accuracy orthographically shallow content words as well as opaque, yet high-frequency function words such as pronouns and prepositions.

The New Curriculum comprises a separate curriculum for literacy preparation in preschool (three- to five-year-olds) — Foundation of Reading and Writing in Arabic as a Mother Tongue: A Preschool Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). The objective of this curriculum is to enhance the development of early literacy with special focus on the basic components that pave the way for reading and writing at school . . . The aim is not to teach children the decoding of words and texts or the writing of texts using conventional spelling.

(p. 10)

Novel facets of the Arabic language and literacy curriculum for preschool in Arabic-speaking schools in Israel include acknowledging, for the first time, the importance of the spoken vernacular of children in leveraging literacy acquisition in Standard Arabic. This is reflected in the following assumption:

The starting point in the development of basic literacy skills in Arabic is the spoken language, and this is for the following reasons: a) Standard Arabic and Spoken Arabic share many structural linguistic features; b) the linguistic knowledge and
representations that the child brings to the literacy learning task are almost wholly in Spoken Arabic; c) some aspects of the linguistic reservoir that the child has in Spoken Arabic can be used to leverage Standard Arabic literacy acquisition; and d) some basic literacy skills in Spoken Arabic may be conducive to the acquisition of literacy in Standard Arabic.

Second, the new preschool curriculum acknowledges the intimate relationship between preschool language and literacy skills and literacy acquisition and academic achievement in higher grades. Third, it assumes that literacy acquisition is grafted on acquisition of a number of language and literacy components including phonological awareness, morphological awareness, letter knowledge, print concepts and lexical knowledge. Fourth, it stresses that oral language comprehension skills in Standard Arabic contribute to literacy acquisition in Standard Arabic. Fifth, it concedes that literacy does not develop spontaneously and it requires explicit mediation and instruction. (For more details, see Aram and Sverdlov, this volume.)

The conceptualization and benchmarks of early Arabic literacy success in Israel are reflected in the content of a regionally administered Arabic literacy diagnostic test administered in phases throughout the first grade. This is the ‘Test of Reading and Writing in Arabic in the 1st Grade’, an individually administered diagnostic assessment battery intended to identify children with reading delay and to specify the basic literacy components that they might have failed to develop so that suitable intervention may be designed. The battery includes the following sub-tests: letter knowledge (name and sound), phonological awareness, syllable decoding, word reading (familiar and unfamiliar), oral reading fluency (short-text reading), reading comprehension (sentence–picture matching, sentence completion and text comprehension), listening comprehension (sentence–picture matching) and word spelling. In addition to the sub-tests delineated above, care has been taken within each sub-test to address the characteristics of the Arabic language and orthography. In the letter–sound knowledge sub-test, the letters are broken down into categories according to the potential difficulties they may present, for example letters mapping diglossic phonemes absent from the spoken vernacular of the learner, such as the phonemes /Ø/ and /ð/ (spelled ﺚ and ﺅ, respectively), which are absent from most northern Palestinian dialects. (While the identity of the absent phonemes might vary from one learner to another, depending on their spoken vernacular backgrounds, the category of diglossic phonemes occurs in all dialects, restricted to a small subset of marked phonemes.) Another category consists of letters mapping velarized (or emphatic) phonemes, such as /s/ or /d/ (spelled ﺞ and ﺞ, respectively) which are difficult for children to discriminate from their non-velarized counterparts /s/ and /d/ (س and د, respectively). Another consideration is variations in letter shape (allography), hence the use of two letter–sound knowledge tasks, testing both the default shape of the letter and the various ligated shapes. Finally, as speed may be a more sensitive indicator of mastery than accuracy, especially in Arabic shallow orthography, some tasks (e.g. letter–sound knowledge and reading) measure speed in addition to accuracy. The diagnostic battery is administered in three phases and is distributed free to all teachers across the country together with a CD depicting a three-hour lecture presenting the theoretical framework for the test, as well as the structure, administration and scoring of the tests delivered by the coordinator of the committee and the head of the Arabic language division at the National Authority for Testing and Evaluation at the Ministry of Education. The lecture is delivered in Arabic and it may be accessed through the website of the Ministry of Education.
Early literacy education in Arabic

Another assessment tool is known as the Mizav Test or the أمنجاعة، والمتحمسة للفحص، for the second grade. The content specifications for this test reflect the benchmarks of literacy education at the end of the second grade: (i) word decoding tested using word–picture matching tasks or sentence completion; (ii) reading comprehension tested at the sentence level, the paragraph level and at the text level; (iii) spelling; (iv) writing ability; and (v) familiarity with basic grammatical constructions of Arabic, such as subject–verb and noun–adjective agreement, using functional tasks that are authentic and communicative in nature.

The benchmarks of Arabic literacy education in Israel are also reflected in the content and format of a new series of reading primers (grades 1–6) entitled العربية لغتنا ‘Arabic is our language’. This book series includes reading primers for the first to the sixth grade developed by the Centre of Educational Technology over the last six years or so, and immediately after the new curriculum appeared in 2009.

Arabic literacy policy and practice in the Palestinian territories

The ‘Palestinian territories’ include the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated that the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip amounted to 3.94 million in 2009 and approximately 4.3 million in 2014. Education in the Palestinian territories is centralized in regard to its curriculum, textbooks, instructions and regulations, with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education responsible for the whole education sector from pre-primary to higher education and for recruiting and training teachers. In the Palestinian territories education system, compulsory basic education includes grades one to ten. Repetition of years does not occur in grades one to three; however, the ministry policy is for students in grades four to twelve to repeat a grade where they do not perform well.

Like in Israel, the objectives of the new curriculum in the Palestinian territories reflect the cultural, linguistic and national values of Palestinians and they include the general aim of fostering in young students (grades one to four) pride in their religion, language, Arabism and homeland (Country of Palestine, The Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Teacher’s Guide 2010–2011). At a more linguistic level, the new curriculum states the following general objectives:

Training in the listening skill and in listening comprehension, proper articulation of the sounds of letters, reading vowelized texts aloud accurately and with expression, reading written texts silently with proper speed, clear and errorless (hand) writing (meaning with no spelling mistakes), acquiring a large enough lexicon that would enable students to express themselves, acquiring the ability to express themselves using a simple yet correct form of Standard Arabic, learning by-heart verses from the Quran as well as from other religious and literary sources, imitating linguistic patterns presented to them.

(p. 3)

With respect to basic literacy education, the objectives of Arabic language education also include the following: listening carefully to the teacher’s oral reading, discriminating between the different forms of letters according to their position in the word, recognizing short and long vowels, as well as other diacritics, reading words and sentences accurately, understanding words and sentences, discriminating between the standard phonemes that are represented by
some letters and their spoken equivalents, discriminating between letters whose phonemes are phonetically similar or those whose shapes are visually similar, and segmenting words into syllables and phonemes (p. 4).

In the Palestinian territories, the nationally used textbook "Our Beautiful Language" (Muslim et al., 2012) developed by the Department of Curriculum Development of the Palestine Ministry of Education is, as stated by the authors, ‘a translation of the general guidelines of the curriculum of the Arabic language and literature’ (Preface). In this book, the authors argue that, in accordance with the research literature, they have followed a synthetic/analytic (phonetic) approach to the teaching of reading. They also claim that, in the presentation of the different letters, they have taken into consideration their phonetic and visual properties as well as their relative frequency in the language. Finally, it is stated that the book follows a systematic structure with each section starting with a speaking activity, followed by reading exercises, letter extraction and finally by a writing activity (not spelling).

The books that had been in use in schools in the Palestinian territories prior to the development of this new curriculum were mainly Jordanian and Egyptian, and were conceived by experts as not suitable either in form (orthographic representation) or in content for the Palestinian student. For instance, Barhuum (1997) argued that the Egyptian books created difficulties in word decoding for beginning readers because some of the orthographic conventions used were different from those followed in Palestine, such as the deletion of the dots from the letter ya or the inconsistent use of short vowel diacritics. Additionally, Kurdi (1997) argued that the preponderance of old (literary and religious) over modern texts in these books was not conducive to enhancing literacy that would relate to the language use experienced by children in present day Palestine. In light of such criticism, the new book series developed by the Palestinian Ministry of Education (Muslim et al., 2012) aims ‘for the content of the texts to be extracted from the local environment of the students and from what they hear and see, so that they do not feel linguistically alienated’ (Preface).

Early literacy education in Arabic: the case of Gulf-Arabic countries

The Arabic-speaking countries in the Gulf region are a good contrast with Arabic-speaking populations in Israel and Palestine. Most of the societies within the Gulf region are based on strongly held traditions and tribal affiliations, as well as government structures based around deeply embedded monarchical and religious leadership/values. However, the oil-based wealth and the aim to modernize education has led to a conflict between the need for rapid change and a commitment to traditional values and concepts. For education, this can mean a struggle between learning traditional content stated explicitly by text or tutor, and hence acquired by rote and with deference to the teacher, versus developing creative and entrepreneurial citizens who can change with variations in circumstances, based on their own initiative. Although education systems vary across the region, the two examples in this sub-section (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) exemplify many of these features and should provide the reader with an overview of some of the educational issues that concern many.

Education systems and policies

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest country within the Middle East area with a total population of nearly 30 million (Saudi Arabian Government Central Department of Statistics and Information www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/ based on 2010 census). Eight Arab countries border Saudi Arabia (Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen
Early literacy education in Arabic

and Bahrain) and there are economic, cultural and educational links among all. Kuwait has about 1.5 million Kuwaiti citizens, but also a large number of itinerant workers, many from elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim world. Kuwait has many similarities to Saudi Arabia in education provisions. Most government schools in the region (and all government mainstream schools in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) offer single-sex education. Many private schools, often developed to cater for the itinerant workforce, are also used by citizens. Both public and private schools are supervised by divisions of the Ministry of Education.

The organization of education is also similar. Children may attend kindergarten, which is normally not compulsory, for one or two years. Primary school lasts for about five to six years, and is followed by secondary/high school and then college/university. Primary school is compulsory and typically starts at age six (though the age ranges of children in classes suggests that this is not rigorously enforced). Many students complete high school, and there is a growing population of college/university students, with university entry typically dependent on level of attainment in high school examinations. (For further information on early education structures, see UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2006, and UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2011.)

Ministries of Education are primarily responsible for planning and strategic issues, as well as monitoring the development of policies. They set the curriculum to be taught in schools and the areas covered, which typically include the Holy Quran, the Arabic language, mathematics and science, arts and citizenship, and the English language: in Kuwait, English language and literacy lessons start in the initial years of schooling, but later in the primary years in other countries in the region. Committees appointed through a ministry write and revise the textbooks used to teach subjects around the country. Ministries also oversee assessments of student achievement that occur during and/or at the end of each education level. In many cases there are compulsory examinations leading to progression to the next level, particularly at the end of the primary school stage. Ministry administrators determine learning levels and progression criteria, which allow the child to be assessed against prescribed subject knowledge and skills. Consistent with ministry (and hence the teacher’s) focus, examinations typically assess the student’s mastery of the contents of ministry-produced textbooks.

The education system in Saudi Arabia has been a main target for national investment and development. For example, the Ministry of Education’s ten-year plan from 2004 to 2014 (Ministry of Education General Directorate for Planning, 2005) for the development of education includes statements about the importance of an integrated and comprehensive education system as part of a long-term commitment to improvement (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2010). (See discussions on the evidence of change in Alhamed et al., 2007, and Alsunbl et al., 2008.) In addition, the government-backed Tatweer (Development) project aims to take education into the modern era to cope with the global scientific and economic revolution (Ministry of Education, 2009; see also discussions in Al-Mikaimzi, 2008). It identified curriculum and learning materials, the learning environment, teacher training and professional development, and the promotion of extra-curricular activities, as areas in need of development and enhancement in Saudi Arabia.

Similar investment has been evident in Kuwait. Increases in compulsory education over the years have led the State of Kuwait General Secretary of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development (2010) to report that basic literacy grew to nearly 100 per cent of 15–25-year-olds in 2008. However, basic literacy here seems to refer to a relatively low level and there are still many children and adults with poor reading and writing skills: the 2011 Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study placed Kuwait near the bottom of countries assessed. Therefore, despite progress in participation, there are still discussions (both in the popular
Elinor Saiegh-Haddad and John Everatt

press and academic publications) about major limitations in the education system (see Ayoub, 2012; see also Almoosa et al., 2012; Burnery and Mohammed, 2002). Critiques target the highly theoretical nature of the curriculum, and its focus on memorization rather than understanding, as well as concerns about teacher training standards. Often, teaching in primary schools is more about finishing the curriculum than delivering the lesson or involving students. Kuwaiti youth, particularly males, do not seem to value teaching as a profession: Kuwaitis make up only about 20–25 per cent of teachers in Kuwait (see discussions in Al-Sharaf, 2006, and Ayoub, 2012). This leads to a dependence on teachers from other countries, mostly from other Arabic-speaking countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria). However, there is little evidence that these teachers are chosen carefully; and differences in background can lead to disruption problems in classrooms.

The ethos of teacher training courses is also transmitting information from tutor to student teacher, not the best way to develop or assess competencies in the student teachers. Most courses are theoretical in focus, with field-based training being a relatively minor part of preparation prior to taking charge of classrooms. As such, many teachers have little or no understanding of special needs, and little experience of varying teaching to accommodate different needs (although there are attempts to improve such teacher practical experience: see Al-Manabri et al., 2013). If learning difficulties are discussed in teacher-training courses, coverage is almost entirely theoretical in nature (Elbeheri and Everatt, 2011).

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have both ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (www.un.org/disabilities/countries.asp?id=166). However, inclusion can be viewed as a major challenge for education systems (see discussions in Mitchell, 2010), and mainstream specialist support for students with special needs is sparse in the region (see also Almoosa et al., 2012). Although Saudi Arabia has been doing relatively well in terms of including children with disabilities (Al-Mousa, 2010), the numbers of children identified as experiencing special support (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2011) is lower than might be expected given the size of the population and may reflect an under-identification of children with special educational needs. There is still evidence of a shortage of appropriately trained professionals in the field of special education (Alquraini, 2011), a problem faced by many Arab world countries (e.g. Gaad, 2011).

**Literacy teaching and learning**

The teaching of reading and writing may also suffer from the emphasis on teaching a curriculum that is prevalent in many Gulf Arab countries. Often, teachers feel that they have to follow strictly the content of, and the sequence provided within, ministry-produced curriculum textbooks, the principal objectives being little more than to complete the content within the prescribed period and to prepare the students to pass examinations. As such, reading is seen as a product of classroom routine, involving little enjoyment and relentless practice. In many curricula early teaching of reading involves statements about rules or the use of word cards and similar materials, so the teacher’s focus is on enhancing sight vocabulary. Whole-word and look-and-say-type teaching strategies are used to enable children to memorize the visual forms of words that are selected from vocabularies that a ministry would expect the child to acquire. Reading materials typically include pictures/drawings next to a word in order to teach children to link written words with their meaning. However, the pronunciations of sounds within words are considered in early teaching, and there seems to be a growing recognition of the importance of phonological processing skills in the region. Typically, in primary school, there is more of an emphasis on phonological features related
to written words by the end of first grade and into following grades. Here letter–sound combinations may be presented with a whole word that contains the letter, and with a picture for context/meaning. The focus is to develop children’s ability to identify letter sounds and letter names in context (i.e. in words and related to meaning). Although sounding-out strategies will be taught, with the aim to facilitate word decoding, many teachers focus on words and their meanings as much as sounds within words – potentially because the teachers themselves may not have a good grasp of phonics. Furthermore, the rote learning of links between sounds and written forms leads to teaching decoding as another set of materials to learn rather than providing strategies to support learning. In many curricular materials, letters are presented individually to the child as well as in words (letters change shape depending on their position within Arabic words), with children being taught to write letters with and without vowel diacritics.

By the end of grade three and into grade four, the emphasis is on reading comprehension skills and related grammatical knowledge, as formal school assessments become increasingly important so that teachers focus on test success. The curriculum progressions and assessment policies lead to teachers emphasizing the rules (typically grammatical) of the orthography and acquiring vocabulary, rather than linking written to spoken forms. Given the teacher’s own experience of learning to read (which may explain their poor awareness of sounds within words), the traditional emphasis on morphological aspects of the language in teaching the orthography, and the use of non-vowelized text in materials read by adults (in addition to the language/orthography features described in the first part of this chapter, such as diglossia), it is hardly surprising that many children in the Gulf-Arab countries have difficulty with decoding and learning new written words. This is despite evidence that in Arabic, those with better phonological awareness and decoding skills are typically the better readers (Abu-Rabia et al., 2003; Al-Mannai and Everatt, 2005; Elbeheri and Everatt, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad, in press; Taibah and Haynes, 2011).

**Major challenges for current and future early literacy provision in Arabic**

**Diglossia**

Diglossia has been empirically shown to impact on literacy development in Arabic (e.g. Saiegh-Haddad, 2003, 2004, 2007; Saiegh-Haddad and Schiff, 2016). Therefore, it has to be incorporated into the teaching of Standard Arabic. As explicitly noted in the curriculum used in Israel (and to a somewhat lesser degree in the one used in the Palestinian territories, as well as in teaching materials in the Gulf countries), the phonological distance between Standard Arabic and the spoken vernacular used and naturally acquired by children can create problems for the application of a successful phonetic-based approach and should, therefore, be given sufficient attention and proper treatment. The impact of the phonological distance is not limited to some phonemes represented by a few of the Arabic letters, but extends to the phonological representations of words stored in the lexicon of children. The quality of these representations impacts on word-level reading and spelling development as well as reading comprehension (Saiegh-Haddad, in press; Saiegh-Haddad et al., 2011; Saiegh-Haddad and Haj, submitted; Saiegh-Haddad and Schiff, 2016).

**The status of spoken Arabic**

The new curriculum used in Israel clearly states that a starting point in the development of literacy in Standard Arabic is the language that the child brings to the literacy learning
task, the spoken language. It also states that the spoken language can be capitalized upon in order to leverage Standard Arabic literacy acquisition. For instance, high phonemic awareness for spoken Arabic phonological forms is key to developing awareness of Standard phonological structures (Saiegh-Haddad, 2003). Similarly, a large lexicon in Spoken Arabic and good language comprehension and expression skills facilitate further vocabulary learning, comprehension and expression in Standard Arabic. In contrast with this positive and valuable attitude to the spoken language of children, according to the authors of the Arabic language primer ‘Our Beautiful Language’ used in Palestine, the goal of the book is ‘to help students relinquish spoken Arabic forms and use Standard Arabic forms instead’ (Muslim et al., 2012, Preface). Indeed, while some aspect of Spoken Arabic may interfere with performance in Standard Arabic and should be relinquished in favour of more standard forms, others should be capitalized upon to enhance language and literacy development in Standard Arabic. Moreover, even when some Spoken Arabic structures must be relinquished and inhibited, such inhibition, especially in the early grades, should be mediated and hence consciously executed. In other words, the potential interference from Spoken Arabic should be explicitly explained to children leading to proper management and control of language processing. This may be particularly challenging in some countries in the Arab world, for example Kuwait, where the majority of teachers grew up using a different form of spoken Arabic to that used by the Kuwaiti children in their classrooms, but explicit reference in course materials of such linguistic links may support teachers’ understanding of the sound structures in Arabic, as well as promoting better learning in their students.

Knowledge versus skill

Language and literacy education has for over five decades now realized the importance of teaching communicative and functional language skill development, in contrast to a focus on knowledge about language. This perspective has to be more strongly stressed in the teaching of Standard Arabic language and literacy. It will certainly require the development of proper materials that are more functional and communicative in nature and that contribute to practice in fluency and skill building and teacher training in how to better implement such approaches (Saiegh-Haddad and Spolsky, 2014).

Teacher training

As mentioned above, there is a need to implement a system of learning and teaching across the education system that recognizes the key elements of language and literacy, and the primary aim (based on a clear educational philosophy) of developing skills. This needs to be started in student–teacher training colleges, and should include elements that consider the potential for diversity of learning, which will help inform a better understanding of learning and how to implement a curriculum for learning, as well as explaining links between language and literacy for better teacher competence in reading and writing tuition. Training within schools should also be emphasized, particularly in contexts where teaching is undergoing major change and development. This student–teacher training should be followed up with good supervision practices and continuing professional development practices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted a portrayal of the philosophy and practice in early literacy education in four Arabic-speaking groups: the Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel and the
Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories (covered by the first author), as well as Arabic speaking in two Gulf countries: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (covered by the second author). We have revealed some commonalities and differences in the concept of early literacy education in the different states and have pinpointed some of the challenges that these communities face. We found that, in general, early literacy education in Arabic is grounded in shared conceptions regarding the basic components of early reading development even if those conceptions are yet to be implemented fully in schools.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank our colleagues, friends and students in the various Arabic-speaking countries for sharing curricula, book copies and other documents with us and for helping us make sense of literacy policy and practice in the various regions.

Notes

1 This section of the chapter is based on Saiegh-Haddad and Henkin-Roitfarb (2014). For a detailed discussion see this reference.

2 This section is based on our understanding of the educational theory and practice followed in occupied Palestine as represented in the materials that our Palestinian friends and colleagues have kindly shared with us.

References


Early literacy education in Arabic


